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# Diversity of Sacrifice

Form and Function of  
Sacrificial Practices in the  
Ancient World and Beyond

Edited by  
Carrie Ann Murray

Zeeb-Lanz A., Arbogast R.-M., Bauer S., Boulestin B., Coupey A.-S., Denaire A., Haack F., Jeunesse C., Schimmelpfennig D., Turck R. (2016) – Human Sacrifices as "Crisis Management"? The Case of the Early Neolithic Site of Herxheim, Palatinate, Germany. In Murray C. A. (ed.), *Diversity of Sacrifice. Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond*. Albany: State University of New York Press (IEMA Proceedings, vol. 5), p. 171-189.

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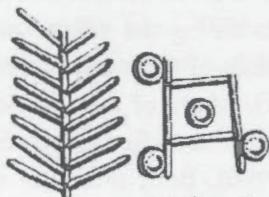
For a more recent and comprehensive study of the human remains from Herxheim, see:

Boulestin B., Coupey A.-S. (2015) – *Cannibalism in the Linear Pottery Culture: The Human Remains from Herxheim*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Human Sacrifices as “Crisis Management”?

#### The Case of the Early Neolithic Site of Herxheim, Palatinate, Germany



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**Abstract** *The early Neolithic site of Herxheim has revealed extraordinary remains of a unique ritual, comprising the sacrifice of more than 500 human individuals. The site consists of a settlement area of the Linear Bandkeramik Culture, surrounded by an earthwork constructed of a double ring of overlapping pits. The sacrificed individuals were butchered like animals, their bones in most cases smashed into small fragments. The leitmotif of the site, intentional destruction of all kinds of material, comprises high quality pottery as well as stone and flint tools or grinding stones. The smashed human bones were found in concentrations of varying size in the pit enclosure of the settlement. A lot of questions accrued during the scientific analysis of the site. The examination of the human bones revealed cut marks and traces of scraping. One of the hypotheses for the normed and repeated treatment of the human bodies calls for cannibalism as an important part of the strange rituals, which do have neither tradition nor analogies in the 650 years of the Linear Pottery culture. Various ideas concerning the ritual, its motivation, and the identity of the sacrificed persons are advanced in this article.*

#### THE BACKGROUND

From roughly 5500 to 4950 B.C.E., the first sedentary, full-fledged tillers in Middle Europe, the bearers of the so called Linear Bandkeramik culture (LBK), seem to have lived rather peaceably in small farming communities spread over the loess-covered

plains extending from the Paris Basin to the borders of the Black Sea (Figure 9.1). But as aggression is a deeply rooted streak in human nature (Mitscherlich 1969; Wahl 2009), naturally violent encounters between individuals as well as different communities of the Bandkeramik also occurred. Proof of murderous conflicts are rare for the whole of this culture—until now, there are only two sites known that bear witness to inner cultural conflicts resulting in the deaths of multiple individuals. One of them is the mass grave of Talheim in Baden-Württemberg, where the skeletons of 38 persons, obviously killed in one event and showing deathly head traumata were found unceremoniously thrown into a large pit (Wahl and König 1987; Wahl and Strien 2007).

The other example for an obviously violent conflict is the large settlement site of Aspang in Austria. In the entrance area of a ditch system surrounding the village and at various other places in the ditch, the dislodged skeletal elements of 67 humans were detected (Teschler-Nicola et al. 2006; Windl 1996, 1999, 2001). Many of the individuals showed mortal head injuries caused primarily by the transverse hafted adze, the characteristic Bandkeramik stone tool (Teschler-Nicola et al. 1996). Both sites date to the latest phase of the LBK-culture around 5000 B.C.E.

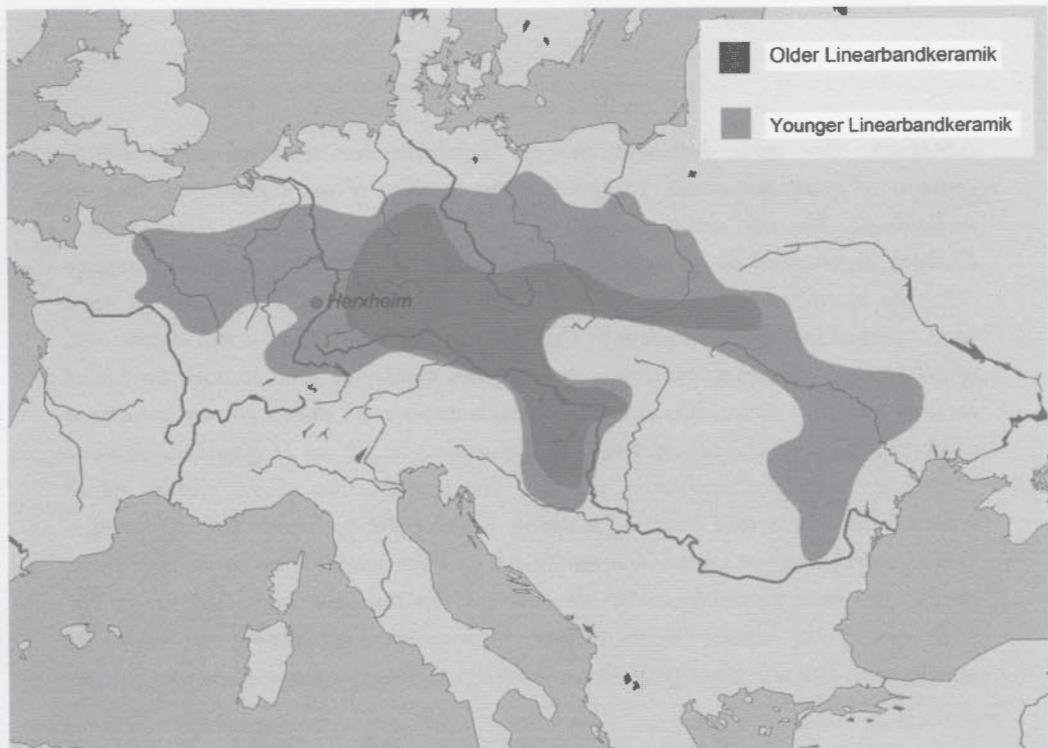


FIGURE 9.1 Geographical distribution of the Linear Pottery Culture (5600–4950 B.C.E.) from the Paris Basin to the borders of the Black Sea (GDKE Rheinland-Pfalz, Dir. Landesarchäologie—Speyer).

Although initially considered as evidence of warlike context, the features and findings from Herxheim soon revealed a pattern that must have resulted from something entirely different than a "normal" interpersonal aggressive conflict.

#### THE SITE OF HERXHEIM

The Bandkeramik site of Herxheim, consisting of a settlement area surrounded by a double earthwork, lies at the western periphery of the modern village of Herxheim in the southwest of the Palatinate (southwest Germany). Approximately half of the complex was excavated during two campaigns (Figure 9.2), the first representing a rescue excavation from 1996 to 1998, the second being a research enterprise from 2005 to 2008 (Zeeb-Lanz and Haack 2006).

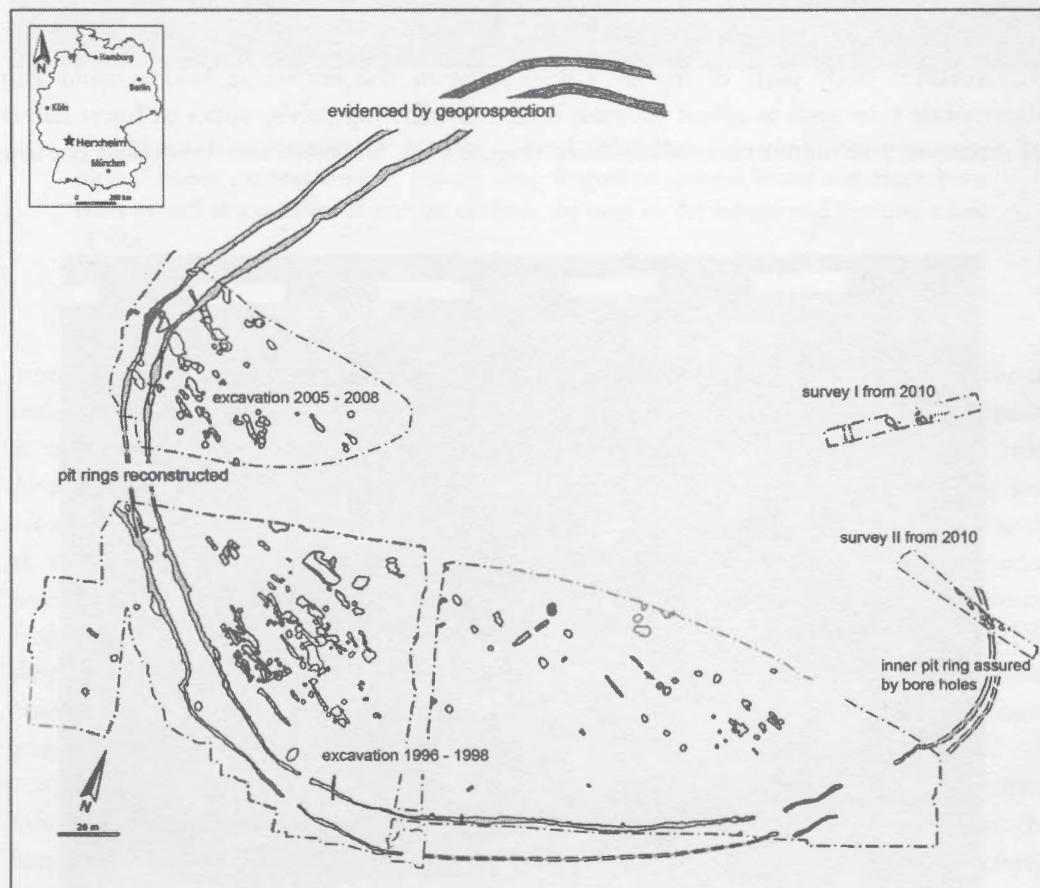


FIGURE 9.2 Plan of the excavated and prospected areas of the settlement and double pit enclosure of Herxheim. (GDKE Rheinland-Pfalz, Dir. Landesarchäologie-Speyer)

While we initially thought the earthwork to be a sort of “pseudo-ditch,” consisting of overlapping pits dug out and filled over a long period of time, the analysis of the excavation executed by F. Haack (2014) revealed that in fact the earthwork consists of long stretches of pits dug at the same time that resulted in long ditch segments. All of these were obviously dug in a rather short period of time not long before the “ritual phase” of the site. Only a few pits were actually dug into already refilled parts of the ditch system, thus creating overlapping features.

In many parts of the ditch system, extraordinary find compositions could be documented (Zeeb-Lanz et al. 2007). They consisted mainly of heavily fragmented human skeleton elements of more than 500 individuals. From the age distribution of the dead, they were intentionally sacrificed here, as they do not represent a naturally deceased community.

### CONCENTRATIONS OF HUMAN REMAINS AND ARTIFACT GROUPS IN THE DITCHES

#### THE HUMAN REMAINS

The smashed body parts of the dead were lying in concentrations, which could also incorporate torsos such as spinal columns with still-adhering pelvis, upper or lower halves of skeletons, and more or less whole limbs (Figure 9.3). The concentrations could contain



FIGURE 9.3 Lower legs with feet from the inner pit ring of the enclosure.



FIGURE 9.4 Concentration N° 9 of the research excavation, dug out in "negative technique," shows the scattering of human bone fragments, animal bones and cattle horn cores as well as a number of human calottes, the ones in the foreground forming a sort of nest.

human bone fragments up to approximately 4,000 pieces (Figure 9.4). But the different skeleton elements present in each concentration did not represent whole individuals, as various parts such as ribs or vertebrae and also long bones were missing as a rule. Also, the number of skulls in one concentration of fragmented human individuals was inconsistent with the postcranial rests in the same complex of bone rests (Boulestin et al. 2009:976f.). Furthermore, most of the skulls had been manipulated in a very special way (Orschiedt and Haidle 2001:147f.), leaving only the skullcaps or "calottes" intact. Fragments of the facial parts of the skulls were also found in all the concentrations, but they were not as frequent as the skullcaps themselves. The calottes in several cases were observed arranged together positively in "nests" (Figure 9.5), but in most cases, they were unsystematically mixed with other fragments of human skeletons.

Close observation of the human skulls, bones, and bone fragments revealed quite a number of traces of specific, unequivocally anthropogenic manipulations of the dead: the bones of the postcranial skeleton show distinctive cut marks, especially on the diaphysis of the long bones or the shoulder blades. Subtle parallel shallow cuts or scraping marks could be documented on the long bones (Boulestin et al. 2009:974). On quite a number of the calottes, fine long cuts from flint knives stretch from the root of the nose over the whole skullcap to the nape of the neck. Beyond that, some entirely preserved spinal



FIGURE 9.5 All in all thirteen human calottes had been stacked together in the form of a "nest" in this concentration in the inner pit ring.

columns revealed the absence of the transverse processes of the thoracic vertebrae; the mutilation of the vertebrae suggests ribs were cut off from the spinal column.

#### OTHER ARTIFACTS IN THE CONCENTRATIONS

The concentrations, however, did not exclusively contain the rests of manipulated human bodies. They also revealed a spectrum of decorated pottery, which is surprising in various aspects. On the one hand, it is the largest amount of ornate pottery found at an early Neolithic site. On the other hand, the pottery from Herxheim is characterized by its extraordinary quality in ornamentation, design, and fabrication (Zeeb-Lanz et al. 2009a:212–214, 2009b:117–120). The embellishment is especially accurately designed and contains a captivating variety. Most of the pottery had been highly polished, and the polish is still visible on the potsherds today. Among the forms of the decorated pots, the bulbous bottle plays a dominant role.

As many sherds could be restored to whole or nearly whole vessels (Figure 9.6), it can be concluded they had been smashed directly on site and then scattered in the concentrations. Around 20 miniature pots had not been smashed; of these only the handles had been cut of intentionally.

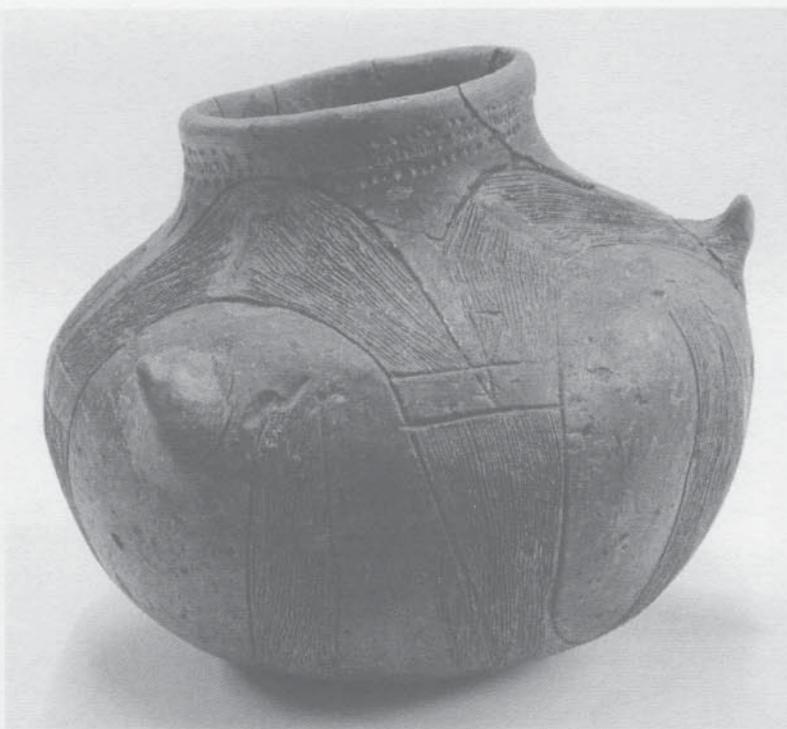


FIGURE 9.6 Example of a high quality ornamented vase from the pit enclosure of Herxheim.

A surprising feature was the stylistic analysis of the pottery decoration: the vessels that consistently date to the younger and youngest phase of the Bandkeramik do not all bear the expected regional decoration style of the Palatinate. Moreover, nearly half of the vessels revealed regional Bandkeramik ornamentation styles from areas as far away as Bohemia (approximately 400 km east of Herxheim) (Figure 9.7). In all, eight different non-local styles of decoration were detected in the ceramic spectrum deriving from the concentrations with smashed human skeleton elements. Whether the vessels were actually made in the respective regions cannot be said with total certainty, but clay analyses proved that they were not created from local clay of the Palatinate. Quite a number of undecorated pots, ranging from flat bowls to huge storage vessels, the latter in some cases decorated with clay bands, were also found in association with human bones and other findings in the concentrations of the pit enclosure.

Destruction can be monitored in other artifact categories as well, namely stone and flint tools or grinding stones (Zeeb-Lanz et al. 2009a:207–209). Stone adzes were destroyed by smashing them in half, flint blades—usually those from high quality raw materials—were broken, while grinding stones were found shattered into many small fragments. The wide variety of bone and antler artifacts found in the pit enclosure (Figure 9.8) were sometimes broken, but the degree of destruction cannot be distinguished from

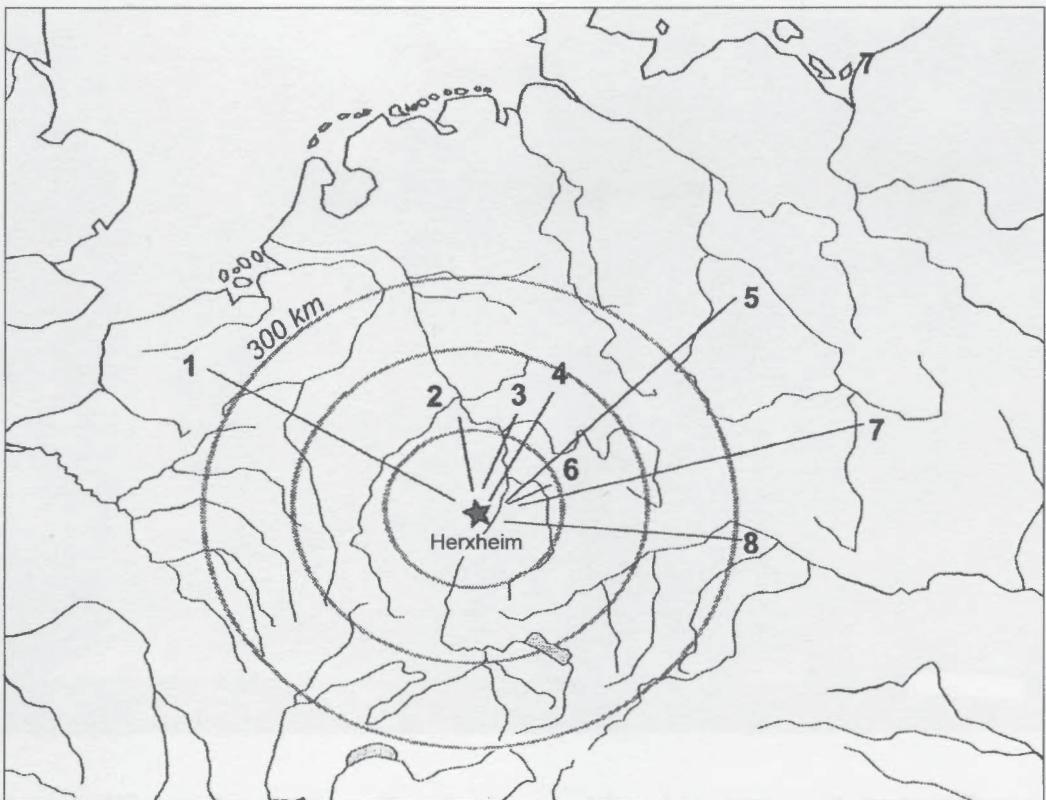


FIGURE 9.7 Distribution of the origins of the pottery ornamentation styles found on the vases in the concentrations of the pit enclosure. 1=Blicquy; 2=Rhine-Moselle; 3=Rhine-Main hatched style; 4=Nordhessen (style of Leihgestern); 5=Elster-Saale; 6=Neckar; 7=Bohemia (style of Šarka); 8=Bavaria.

that of comparable artifacts from normal refuse pits in LBK settlements (Zeeb-Lanz et al. 2007:225).

A further category in the concentrations consists of animal bones. A special selection found its way into the respective complexes of human bones and other artifacts. Domestic animals such as cattle, pig, sheep, and goat are represented by certain extremities that cannot be denoted as butchering decay (Arbogast 2009). We found forelegs and hind legs, as well as the horn cores of cattle and aurochs—all of the mentioned parts depict the respective animal without doubt and might perhaps be interpreted as *pars pro toto* depositions of the particular animal. Wild animals, especially small carnivores such as fox, wild cat, or marten are represented by mandibles or maxillae; around thirty of these jaws were found in a singular deposition in the inner pit ring. A striking feature is the presence of around 200 dog bones representing parts of the animals or even whole cadavers (Zeeb-Lanz et al. 2007:211). The bones belong to at least six individuals and the number of dog bones is greater than the quantity of rests of this animal in all other known Bandkeramik settlements in Europe. In summary, the animal bones in the pit

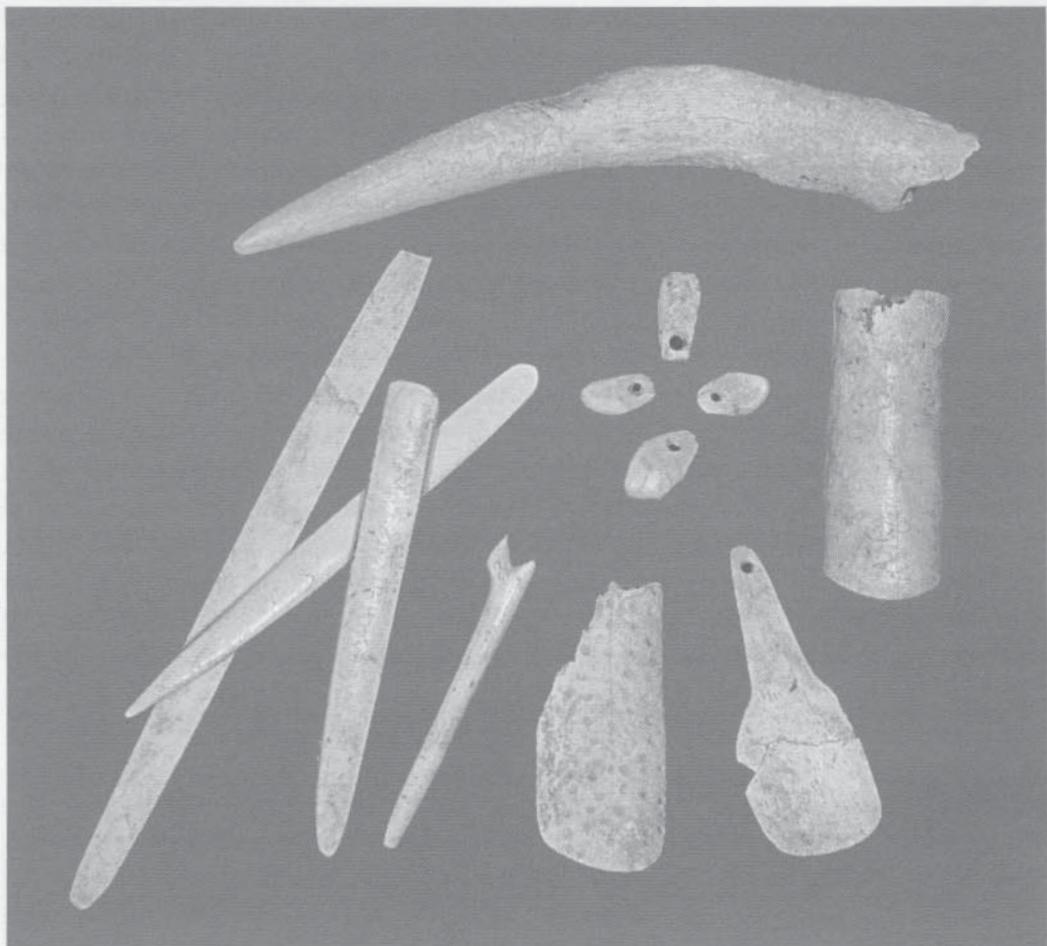


FIGURE 9.8 Assortment of animal bones, teeth and antler artifacts from the pit enclosure.

enclosure constitute a selection of animal species and parts that underline the special character of the features in the earthwork of Herxheim.

#### INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES TO THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH RESULTS

##### ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE HUMAN REMAINS

What can at first sight be deduced from an overview of the composition of findings of Herxheim is the highly ritual character of the concentrations in the pit enclosure. The leitmotif of the site, violent destruction of objects of all kinds and the deposition of the shattered rests in concentrations in the pit enclosure, shows a recurrent, repetitive,

and normative pattern (Boulestin et al. 2009:979). Close observation and analysis of the human rests revealed, furthermore, that the dead were treated in a systematic way which strongly resembles the technique and procedure of butchering animals with the aim of gaining nutrition. The cut marks on diaphysis, shoulder blades, or on the ramus mandibulae (Figure 9.9) suggest the cutting through of muscles and fibers to sever the extremities from the trunk, the separation of the mandible from the head and the “levée de l'échine” (detachment of the spinal column) as the first part of the special treatment of the human bodies. In a second step, the bones were freed from all flesh and tissue, allocated by the parallel scraping marks found especially on the long bones and on skeleton parts that hold a considerable amount of soft tissue. All the described actions were obviously undertaken on the fresh bone, relatively soon after the death of the victims. This is proved by the characteristic form and length of the long bone fragments as well as the appearance of the fracture outlines (Boulestin et al. 2009:974). After the excision of all meat and fat, the cleaned skeleton elements, especially massive long bones, were smashed into small fragments. Assumedly, this action was undertaken for marrow extraction. A conspicuous fact remains that quite a number of skeleton elements rich of marrow and fat, such as vertebrae bodies and epiphysis, are often missing in the compositions of human remains. These observations have led to the hypothesis that cannibalism may



FIGURE 9.9 Example for cut marks on a ramus mandibulae of a human individual from one of the concentrations.

have taken place at Herxheim as a potential part of the approved rituals (Boulestin et al. 2009). This hypothesis cannot be proved directly, but it is supported by a number of arguments: the treatment of the human sacrifices is comparable to butchering methods for animals, as well as the heavy fragmentation of the long bones which can be observed in animal butchering remains. Furthermore, there is a distinctive overrepresentation of skulls whereas patella and vertebrae bodies, for example, are relatively underrepresented. The treatment of the human bodies, especially the destruction of marrow-rich long bones and other spongy bone parts, can be interpreted as a nutritionally motivated exploitation of the killed individuals.

Not really consistent with the assumption of ritual cannibalism is the special treatment of the skulls of the deceased. The distinctive cut marks on the crania (Figure 9.10) suggest the ablation of the scalp before the skulls were treated in a special way with stone adzes, leaving only the skullcap intact. As most of the heads of the deceased were treated in the same manner, it is obvious that the production of calottes was an intended part of the ritualistic actions. Their abundance in the pit enclosure, as well as in some cases the observed placement of the calottes in the form of "nests" show that they must have had a special meaning for the participants of the strange rituals in Herxheim. The edges of the calottes are not processed any further, negating an interpretation of the manipulated



crania as drinking cups suggested recently in a popular science journal (Schulz 2011). But it cannot be totally excluded that the skullcaps were used during the assumed rituals as eating bowls containing special food—no traces of fare were found inside any of them, though.

Although the treatment of human bodies using butchering methods without the aim of gaining nutrition but rather for religious reasons is well known (e.g., the “sky burials” in Tibet; see Lo Blue 2009), the arguments for cannibalism in a ritual context are the most plausible explanation for the fate of the human victims from Herxheim. Nevertheless, the supposed cannibalization of the human individuals would have been part of a complex ceremony and has to be seen in the context of a larger ritual whose main purpose is the destruction of precious objects, human lives being the most valuable ones among the selection of findings in the concentrations in the pit enclosure.

For the accomplishment of the strange and violent rituals in Herxheim, a maximum time span of 50 years is given by the pottery in the concentrations, which as a whole belongs to the latest phase of the Bandkeramik culture (approximately 5000 to 4950 B.C.E.). But the amount of refitting pottery sherds derived from different pits/concentrations of the enclosure (Denaire 2009) suggests a much shorter time frame. Quite a number of pottery fragments belonging to the same pot were found in different concentrations. In one case, several fitting pottery sherds were found in concentrations lying 120 meters apart, one situated in the inner pit ring, the other in the outer pit ring (Denaire 2009:81). These refitting pottery sherds show fresh breaklines indicating that the sherds did not lie around on the ground for a long time after the destruction of the respective pot but were filled in into different concentrations simultaneously or in the course of a short time span. Quite a number of bone refittings from diverse concentrations underline the observation that the rituals took place in a shorter rather than longer time span.

The huge number of approximately 500 human individuals, counted by excavated skullcaps and intact crania, must be amplified as only half of the enclosure has been examined so far. But even 500 individuals could not have lived and died in a small village like the Herxheim site in the short period of 50 years. The first hypothesis deduced from the various pottery styles present in the concentrations assumed that delegations from a number of communities, some of them originating rather far from Herxheim, came with slaves, prisoners, or other persons selected for sacrifice to Herxheim and participated in the ritual actions.

#### ISOTOPE ANALYSES

Strontium isotope analyses from the first and third molars of a representative random sample of eighty individuals from the pit rings were executed for the verification of the above-mentioned thesis. The sample included children, as well as juveniles and adults from both sexes. To our great surprise it turned out that the majority of the tested individuals did not grow up on loess soils representing the typical residence of the earliest European farmers. In contrary, the teeth showed rather high radiogenic ratios, which

proved that the origin for most of the people was from mountainous regions with granite or gneiss bedrock (Turck et al. 2012). As there is not a single Bandkeramik settlement in Europe known to lie in a low or high mountain range, the isotope analyses present a further mystery in the enigmatic features of the Herxheim site. DNA analyses from teeth of the isotope-tested individuals are under way to answer the question of whether the human sacrifices of Herxheim perhaps represent a late Mesolithic population.

For the whole area of the Palatinate, until now there has been one site that revealed artifacts dating to the latest phase of the Mesolithic: the Weidentalhöhle near Wilgartswiesen in the southernmost part of the Palatinate (Cziesla 1992). A similar situation can be stated for Rhine-Hesse; following the research to date, it seems there was a very scarce late Mesolithic population in the regions directly west of the Rhine. Even if the DNA tests hint at Mesolithic people, this would still pose a problem concerning the identity of the many sacrificed individuals from the double pit enclosure at Herxheim. Besides, until now there are no DNA samples of the latest Mesolithic hunter-gatherers of Middle Europe available, making the identification of the dead from Herxheim still more complicated.

### HUMAN SACRIFICES IN HERXHEIM—A SPECIAL CASE

#### HUMAN SACRIFICES—SOME GENERAL REMARKS

The term *sacrifice* comprises a whole world of different settings. Even in theology, notions such as "cult," "sacrifice," "magic," "sacred operation," or "ritual" are often used nonspecifically and within a variety of contexts. Archaeology has adopted these terms without defining them with regard to their usage in explaining archaeological features (Beilke-Voigt 2007:18). Therefore, the term *sacrifice* encompasses quite a number of different acts, ideas, and likewise many varying sceneries. A general definition (Malina 2000:23ff.) or a general theory of sacrifice has not yet found comprehensive acceptance in the scientific community (Beilke-Voigt 2007:18; Janowski and Welker 2000). A "pragmatic and open" definition of the term *sacrifice* is offered by B. Gladigow: sacrifice is generally an integrated part of complexes of ritual actions; the symbolic value of the latter relies on the "logic of social relations" (Gladigow 2000:88). The author sees sacrifices as a dialectical act of giving and taking, of participation and distribution; the ritual meal also plays an important role in this context. Notwithstanding his "pragmatic and open" general determination of the term *sacrifice*, Gladigow states that an unambiguousness of the concept of sacrifice does not exist (2007:93). He rather tries to focus on the complexity of the rituals that include sacrifices to connect these rituals with the respective cultures in which they are practiced. Gladigow discusses the routines of sacrifices, the circumstances of their occurrence, and their connection with economical as well as rational factors. Further, the economical, political, and social interconnections of the respective rituals and the included sacrifices have to be accounted for in deciding on the definite nature of each variation of sacrifice (see Gladigow 2007:103f.). A shorter and more general formula for the concept *sacrifice* is given by H. Hubert and M. Mauss: They state: "La sacrifice est un acte religieux qui, par

la consécration d'une victime, modifie l'état de la personne morale qui l'accomplit ou de certains objets auxquel elle s'intéresse" (Hubert and Mauss 1968:205). The authors, whose essay about the nature and function of sacrifice, first published in "L'Année sociologique 2" from 1899, can still be counted as one of the most important works about sacrifice, concentrate on the traits that connect the different types of sacrifice with a special view of the relation between the sacrificial person and the victim that is sacrificed. The victim personifies the agent between the person who sacrifices (profane world) and the addressee of the sacrifice (sacred world)—and the victim always has to be destroyed during the ritual to fulfill its destination (Hubert and Mauss 1968:302). The victim thus plays the most important part in the sacrifice, acting as a connection between profane and divine (Hubert and Mauss 1968:304f.). The sacrifice has an important social function as it always alludes to social affairs (Hubert and Mauss 1968:306).

As Burkert (1972) has assessed in detail, the origin of sacrifice in human societies already in prehistoric times comprises the act of killing—then, usually a wild animal—and the sacrificial meal afterward (Burkert 1972:20ff.). He emphasizes the relevance of the consumption of the meat of the sacrificed animal, the meal representing an important part of the sacrificial ceremony.

Not all cases of sacrifice are dedicated to the gods—there are also examples of sacrifice where the act itself unfolds a magical power. The release of this power is the ultimate reason for the sacrifice, not the appeasement or invocation of a divine force (Bertholet 1942:5f.). It is generally a great difficulty to comprehend the motives and reasons for sacrifices in an archaeological context—moreover, there are often problems in defining the nature of a sacrifice.

Human sacrifices are attested for a variety of prehistoric and historic peoples. Recent investigations (Bremmer 2007a), but also older literature on the topic, have shown that human sacrifice is found in prehistoric agrarian societies, as well as in larger and more complex societies such as kingdoms or empires (Bremmer 2007b:3). A question that has not yet been answered is whether there exists a correlation between the general degree of violence in a society and the practice of human sacrifice (Bremmer 2007b:7). If a correlation of this kind could be proved, it could shed new light on a number of prehistoric and historic societies.

Sometimes human sacrifices are also combined with cannibalism, the most prominent example being the Aztec sun cult, where the heart of a sacrificed human individual was offered to the sun god and the other parts of the body were consumed by the ceremonial community (Graulich 2007).<sup>1</sup> This consumption was believed to represent a symbolic absorption of the god himself. In rituals comprising human sacrifice we again find the combination of killing the victim and the following consumption as already found in early prehistoric communities.

#### THE SPECIAL CASE OF HERXHEIM

In Herxheim, it is vital to account for the violent destruction of precious things—the most precious being a human life—as the main streak that defines the extraordinary

actions revealed by the archaeological and anthropological analyses. These actions are characterized by repetition, standardization, and normative succession of working steps relative to the treatment of the human bodies. The ritualistic character of the actions is defined by the latter attributes, the overall destructive nature of the treatment of both humans and artifacts and the nature of the destroyed objects.

If we look at the variety of examples for human sacrifices in different societies, it becomes obvious that the social identity of the victims generally ranges within a low level. Slaves or prisoners of war are as a rule were the main sources for human sacrifice (e.g., Graulich 2007:29, for the Aztec human sacrifices). There is also the custom of retainer sacrifices, well attested for the Egyptian early pharaohs (Van Dijk 2007), although the social status of the retainers in ancient Egypt, often young men, cannot be verified.

Neither are we able to decide the place or position in the social hierarchy for the individuals found in the ditch rings at Herxheim. In this special case, the chronological aspect has to be taken into account as well. The concentrations were—following the dating of the pottery and roughly attested by C14 analyses of human bones—deposited in the ditch structures in the latest phase of the Bandkeramik. The whole culture came to a rather sudden end around 4950 B.C.E., an end which the Neolithic research community has assumed to result from a general crisis at least in parts of the LBK-territory. The crisis in some places obviously resulted in local violent aggression between individuals, groups, or whole communities, as shown by the mass grave of Talheim in Germany (Wahl and König 1987; Wahl and Strien 2007) or the enclosed settlement of Asparn in Austria (Windl 1996, 1999, 2001). But actual theatres of war, which could prove “increasingly violent warfare against each other, culminating in an intense struggle in the area of western and central Europe”—as can be read in a recent publication about the end of the Bandkeramik (Golitko and Keeley 2007:332)—are still missing in the archaeological record. Herxheim has revealed by far the largest number of killed persons known in a Neolithic context in Europe, albeit the site cannot be interpreted as a theatre of war. In fact, it rather has to be interpreted as a central place where extraordinary rituals—with human sacrifices that perhaps were consumed as part of the ceremonies—had been accomplished. These rituals have to be seen in close relation to the impending end of the Bandkeramik culture, its traditions and sociocultural norms. The drastic and extreme treatment of the human bodies in Herxheim—probably including even the ritual consumption of their flesh and marrow—might be interpreted as a reaction to the doom that seems to have hovered over the Bandkeramik world in the latest phase of the culture. Actually, there are a number of especially late Bandkeramik sites where corpses were treated in ways unusual to the norms of burial rites, indicating a deep crisis in the sociocultural, economic, and ritual foundations of the culture. Herxheim might well be interpreted as a mirror of this crisis, which eventually led to the disappearance of the Bandkeramik all over Europe. The definite nature of this crisis can at the moment not yet be defined, any more than the question why these strange rituals took place in Herxheim, and what directly triggered them.

There are a number of examples both in ethnology and in prehistory showing that people resorted to human sacrifice when the life, the culture, or the general well-being of their communities was in danger (Bremmer 2007:6, with annotation 28). The victims

were chosen out of specific classes, prisoners of war or slaves representing the prevalent choice (Graulich 2007:24f.). Nevertheless, sacrificing people is the elimination of the most precious value there is—human life. In this regard, the killing of so many individuals of Herxheim could reasonably be interpreted as a reaction to an enormous threat to the culture of the LBK—extreme situations often require extreme measures. This desperate reaction would still be accentuated by the consumption of the sacrificed persons and the ultimate destruction of the skeletons, as well as quite a number of precious artifacts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### NOTE

1. In contrast, P. Hassler denies the existence of human sacrifice in the Aztec culture, interpreting its descriptions and graphic representations as misinterpreted by Western researchers (see Hassler 1992: esp. 246ff.).

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